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BOOK REVIEWS.

Social Rights and Duties. By LESLIE STEPHEN. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1896. 8vo. 2 vols., pp. 255 and 267.

THE open-mindedness and breadth of outlook of these reprinted addresses of Leslie Stephen are most admirable. Few writers exemplify so completely as the author the spirit of his own fine saying: "In the struggle to discover truth even our antagonists are necessarily our co-operators."¹ As the natural accompaniment of this intellectual temper, is a certain lack of definiteness in thought and in expression. The author is so conscientiously cautious that after the most careful balancing of opposing arguments he sometimes hesitates to report which carries the greater weight. The reader is, however, compensated for this defect, if such it be, by many passages brilliant and striking in form as they are admirable in substance. For example, the weak point of some popular economic fallacies is aptly brought out in the sentence: "While people are proposing to lengthen their blankets by cutting off one end to sew upon the other, one has to point out that the total length remains constant."² Again a common failing is cleverly and justly characterized by the designation of it as the "error of inventing some scheme which is in sociology what schemes for perpetual motion are in mechanics."³

To the economist, the essays of most immediate interest are those dealing with the relations of "Science and Politics" and with "the Sphere of Political Economy," with "Competition" and with "Luxury." The more general student of sociology will be interested in nearly all the essays, but especially in those entitled "Social Equality," "Ethics and the Struggle for Existence," and "Heredity."⁴ I shall summarize, partly in the author's own phraseology, some of the discussions and results of the above chapters of the work.

The essay entitled "Science and Politics" is naturally of a general

¹ Vol. i. p. 161.

² Vol. i. p. 123.

³ Vol. i. p. 131.

⁴ The titles of the remaining essays are: The Aims of Ethical Societies, Punishment, the Duties of Authors, the Vanity of Philosophising, and Forgotten Benefactors.

and introductory character. It discusses the possibilities of achieving a real science of sociology. Attempts in this direction have been so far futile, they have resulted for the most part merely in "a heap of vague, empirical observations, too flimsy to be useful in strict logical inference." Indeed, so complicated and so vaguely understood is human character, that the social phenomena that depend upon it can never be made the subject of an exact and complete science of sociology. Still we must recognize that social development is subject to laws however complex they may be, and although we may not hope to understand it in its entirety, we should nevertheless seek to study in the scientific method such of the facts as we can grasp. Physiology, although a less exact science than physics, is not for that reason to be neglected; no more are sociological inquiries to be despised because they do not result in a complete body of exact laws. The study of social development in the scientific spirit "implies, in the first place, the abandonment of the weary system of hunting for fruitful truths in the region of chimeras, and trying to make empty logical concepts do the work of observation of facts. It involves, again, a clear perception of the kind of questions which can be profitably asked, and the limits within which an answer, not of the illusory kind, can really be expected. And then we may come to see that, without knowing it, we have really been trying a vast and continuous experiment, since the race first began to be human. We have, blindly and unconsciously, constructed a huge organism which does, somehow or other, provide a great many millions of people with a tolerable amount of food and comfort. We have accomplished this . . . unconsciously; for each man limited to his own little sphere, and limited to his own interests, and guided by his own prejudices and passions, has been as ignorant of more general tendencies as the coral insect of the reef which it has helped to build. To become distinctly conscious of what it is that we have all been doing all this time, is one step in advance. We have obeyed in ignorance, and as obedience becomes conscious, we may hope within certain narrow limits, to command, or, at least, to direct. An enlarged perception of what have been the previous results may enable us to see what results are possible, and among them to select what may be worthy ends. It is not to be supposed that we shall ever get beyond the need of constant and careful experiment. But, in proportion as we can cultivate the right frame of mind, as each member of society acquires wider sympathies and a larger horizon, it

is permissible to hope that the experiments may become more intelligent; that we shall not, as has so often been done, increase poverty by the very remedies which are intended to remove it, or diverge from the path of steady progressive development, into the chase of some wild chimera, which requires for its achievement only the radical alteration of all experience.”¹

Political economy is sometimes assumed by its exponents and its critics to start with the primary assumption that “the economic man,” or man viewed for the sake of simplicity as purely a business animal, is governed primarily by his desire for wealth. He may however desire this wealth for the sake of many interests other than “those which he buttons into his own waistcoat,” for the benefit of his family or friends, or even for the promotion of knowledge or the establishment of useful institutions; and economic theory should not even seem to ignore these broader aspects of the desire for wealth. But beyond this minor criticism, the assumption of the economic man is an altogether insufficient basis for economic reasoning. “The very conception of economic science supposes all that is supposed in the growth of a settled order of society. . . . The economist really assumes more—and rightfully assumes more—than he sometimes claims. He assumes what Adam Smith assumed at the opening of his great treatise: that is, the division of labor. But the division of labor implies the organization of society. It implies that one man . . . is confident that he will be able to exchange the products of his own labor for the products of the other man’s labor. This, of course, implies settled order, respect for contracts, the preservation of peace, and the abolition of force throughout the area occupied by the society. And this again is only possible in so far as certain political and ecclesiastical and military institutions have been definitely constructed.”²

The object of political economy is to explain the workings of the industrial organization of society which through the division of labor and the cowering of the various kinds of labor adds so enormously to the efficiency of individual effort. The economist should seek to describe this industrial organization somewhat as a military writer might describe the organization of an army. He should explain the functions and interrelations of the various members and groups, viewing them as economic agents (just as the military writer would

¹ Vol. i. pp. 88-90.

² Vol. i. p. 95.

view them as soldiers), recognizing indeed the psychological and political conditions implied but not pausing to analyze these further than his own purposes require. In order thus to explain the mutual relations of the members of the industrial organization the economist has to make certain other assumptions or generalizations from experience—which are ordinarily so obvious that they will hardly be disputed—such for example “that scarcity implies dearness and plenty cheapness; that commodities flow to the markets where they will fetch the highest prices; that there is a certain gravitation towards equalization of profits among capitalists and of wages among labourers,” and so forth. In general “the question of the play of economic forces reduces itself to a problem which may be thus stated: What are the conditions of industrial equilibrium? How must prices, rates of wages, and profit be related in order that the various classes concerned may receive such proportions of produce as are compatible with the maintenance of the existing system of organization?”¹

Our author next considers, only to reject, the conception of political economy as a mathematical science. It is said that political economy “deals throughout with quantities,” but these quantities, in turn, depend upon the play of human desires and human characteristics too complex and variable to be reduced to mathematical formulas. “Differences of national temperament, of political and social constitution, of religious and ecclesiastical organization, will all have an effect; and, therefore, a formula true here and now must, in all probability, fail altogether elsewhere. The formula is, in the mathematical phrase, a function of so many variables that it must be complex beyond all conception if it takes them all into account, while it must yet be necessarily inaccurate if it does not take them into account. But, besides this, the conditions upon which the law obviously depends are not themselves capable of being accurately defined, and still less of being numerically stated. . . . There is no arithmetical measure of the forces of love, or hunger, or avarice, by which (among others) the whole problem is worked out.”²

The historical school, as well as the mathematical, however effective it may be in its criticism of the classical political economy, provides no adequate substitute therefor. The complexity of the facts is such that the method of direct observation and comparison, without the aid of deduction, fails to unravel their significance, and “a treatise on

¹ Vol. i. p. 100.

² Vol. i. pp. 104, 105.

political economy becomes nothing but a miscellaneous collection of facts, with no definite clew or uniform method of reasoning.”¹

Our author is then more in sympathy with the methods (not necessarily with the conclusions) of the moderate members of the deductive school than with their critics, whether of the “mathematical” or the “historical” persuasion. The classic political economy is, in a word, useful so far as it goes; but it does not go so far as some of its devotees would have us suppose. It describes the body politic somewhat as mere mechanics would describe the physical body, accurately, but, of course, not completely. In each case “we have an instance of the way in which perfectly true propositions may, so to speak, be imbedded in a larger theory, and may be of the highest importance, though they are not by themselves sufficient to solve any concrete problem.”² The laws which the economists have formulated “are not laws which, even if established, would enable us to predict the results of any given action; but they are laws which would have to be taken into account in attempting any such prediction.”³ The view of the author of the present position of economics may, perhaps, best be summarized in the following quotation: “I think myself that a study of the good old orthodox system of political economy is useful, . . . even where it is wrong, because, at least, it does give a system, and therefore forces its opponents to present an alternative system, instead of simply cutting a hole in the shoe when it pinches, or striking out the driving wheel because it happens to creak unpleasantly. And I think so the more because I cannot but observe that whenever a real economic question presents itself, it has to be argued on pretty much the old principles, unless we take the heroic method of discarding argument altogether.”⁴ “What I should say (for the more positive services of political economists) is that they have explained, and, I suppose, with considerable accuracy, what is the actual nature of the industrial mechanism; that they have explained fairly its working where the economics are practically the sole or dominant motives; and that they have thus laid down certain truths which require attention even when we take into account the play of other more complex and, as we generally say, higher motives.”⁵

The chapters on luxury, competition, and social equality are in each case given partly to a discussion of the significance of these much

¹ Vol. i. p. 127.

³ Vol. i. p. 128.

⁵ Vol. i. p. 130.

² Vol. i. p. 110.

⁴ Vol. i. pp. 131-132.

misunderstood terms and partly to a consideration of the problems of ethics and politics that they suggest. The gist of the author's attitude may be surmised from the following excerpts: "Whatever employments of wealth contribute to make a man more efficient as an individual member of society, are not to be condemned as luxurious."¹ "The end of a fair competition is the discovery of the ablest men, with a view to placing them in a position where their talents may be turned to most account. . . . But it must be added that fairness includes more than the simple equality of chances. It supposes also that there should be some proportion between the rewards and the merits."² "Equality in my sense implies that everyone should be allowed to compete for every place that he can fill."³ "The only sufficient reason for classes is the efficient discharge of social functions."⁴

The essay on "Heredity" is in its most essential portions an argument that the development of civilization has come not from any improvement through a favorable working of natural selection in the breed, and so in the innate or inherited character of men, but through the accumulation and the handing down of knowledge, of capital and of the means for controlling to human ends the forces of nature. It is not that the average individual has become through selection intrinsically more capable than his ancestors, but that he has at his command the accumulated experience and wisdom of the race. In the same way, it is probable that human advance will mainly depend in the future, not on an improvement of the race by selection, but on an increase of knowledge, an improvement in institutions, and a better training and development of character, especially in the young. If in the words of the author, "the only possible remedy [for present evils] were by so modifying the struggle for existence that the inferior forms may be killed off and a better breed of humanity take the place of the present, we should certainly feel that we were confined within very narrow limits. I do not for a moment say, that such considerations may not point to important practical conclusions. I should be very glad to hear of any practical suggestions, for so applying these doctrines as to increase the probability that the next generation may be stronger, healthier, and more intelligent than the present. But I also assert that the most obvious facts also show that there are enor-

¹ Vol. ii. p. 135.

² Vol. i. pp. 160-164.

³ Vol. i. p. 213.

⁴ Vol. i. p. 204.

mous possibilities of progress without supposing any such organic transformation."¹

The discussion of the relation between "Ethics and the Struggle for Existence" forms perhaps the most valuable and suggestive portion of the work. In form, it is mainly an argument against the position of Professor Huxley that the ethical progress of society demands the nullifying of the natural process of struggle for existence and the survival of the most fit. Leslie Stephen points out that even in the animal world the struggle for existence is not as harsh and revolting as it at first sight appears, and that for the rest it is so far a merely unmoral instead of immoral process. But the real force of his argument is in the firm grasping of the other horn of the dilemma—in the assertion that no sentiment or action which can be shown to tend to enervate the race is in any true sense moral. The excellence of his statement of some of the problems involved will excuse the length of following citation.

The apparent antagonism between the natural laws of race improvement through selection and the claims of morality "seems to be felt in regard to those purely altruistic impulses, which, at first glance at any rate, make it apparently our duty to preserve those who would otherwise be unfit to live. Virtue, says Professor Huxley, is directed 'not so much to the survival of the fittest' as to the 'fitting of as many as possible to survive.' . . . It is often complained that the tendency of modern civilization is to preserve the weakly, and therefore to lower the vitality of the race. This seems to involve inadmissible assumptions. In the first place, the process by which the weaker are preserved consists in suppressing various conditions unfavorable to human life in general." But "to preserve life is to increase the population, and therefore to increase the competition; or in other words to intensify the struggle for existence. The process is as broad as it is long. What we would have to show in order to justify the inference of a deterioration due to this process, would be, not that it simply increased the number of the candidates for a living, but that it gave to the feebler candidates a differential advantage; that they are now more fitted than they were before for ousting their superior neighbors from the chances of support. But I can see no reason for supposing such a consequence to be probable or even possible." "The struggle for existence . . . rests upon the unalterable facts that the world is limited

¹ Vol. i. p. 50.

and population elastic; . . . and under all circumstances those who are fitted by reason of intellectual or moral or physical qualities will have the best chance of occupying good places, and leaving descendants to supply the next generation. It is surely not less true that in the civilized as much as in the most barbarous races, the healthiest are the most likely to live, and the most likely to be ancestors. If so, the struggle will still be carried on upon the same principles, though certainly in a different shape."

"It is true that this suggests one of the most difficult questions of the time. It is suggested, for example, that in some respects the 'highest' specimens of the race are not the healthiest or the fittest. Genius according to some people, is a variety of disease, and intellectual power is won by a diminution of reproductive power. A lower race, again, if we measure 'high' and 'low' by intellectual capacity, may out a higher race, because it can support itself more cheaply, or, in other words because it is more efficient for industrial purposes" . . . "we are engaged in working out a gigantic problem: What is the best, in the sense of the most efficient type of human being? What is the best combination of brains and stomach? We turn out saints, who are 'too good to live,' and philosophers, who have run too rapidly to brains. They do not answer in practice, because they are instruments too delicate for the rough work of daily life. They may give us a foretaste of qualities which will be some day possible for the average man; of intellectual and moral qualities, which, though now exceptional, may become commonplace. But the best stock for the race are those in whom we have been lucky enough to strike out the happy combination, in which greater intellectual power is produced without loss of physical vigor. Such men, it is probable, will not deviate so widely from the average type. The reconciliation of the two conditions can only be effected by a very gradual process of slowly edging onwards in the right direction. Meanwhile the theory of a struggle for existence justifies us, instead of condemning us, for preserving the delicate child, who may turn out to be a Newton or a Keats, because he will leave to us the advantage of his discoveries or his poems, while his physical feebleness assures us that he will not propagate his race."¹

CARLOS C. CLOSSON.

¹ Vol. i. pp. 243-250.